

# AN EVALUATION OF LITERATURE CURRICULUM IN H.U. ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING DEPARTMENT

## H.Ü. İNGİLİZ DİLİ EĞİTİMİ ANABİLİM DALINKAKİ EDEBİYAT DERS PROGRAMININ BİR DEĞERLENDİRMESİ

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study was to collect and interpret views of prospective teachers on literature courses offered in Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching (ELT) department. Hence, such research encompasses experiential knowledge of the participants and the results aim to inform the curriculum development practice situated at ELT departments in Turkey. In order to concretize the views of the prospective English language teachers on the literature courses in their curriculum, 15 prospective language teachers were interviewed via structured questions. Apart from the interviews, an opinion survey of questionnaires was also applied to 100 students who were not interviewed to strengthen and further the interpretation of the findings. In this study, it is found that the prospective teachers view literature courses as an important part of their pre-service teacher education while recommending minor changes in the literature curriculum so that these courses become more effective.

**Key Words:** Literature courses, curriculum, prospective teachers' views, English Language Teaching.

**ÖZET:** Bu çalışmanın amacı Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Anabilim dalında öğrenim görmekte olan İngilizce öğretmen adaylarının ders programlarındaki edebiyat dersleri hakkındaki görüşlerini elde etmek ve yorumlamaktır. Verilerin toplanması ve yorumlanmasında Hacettepe Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalında öğrenim gören dördüncü sınıf öğrencilerinin katılımı sağlanmıştır. Programda öğrenim görmüş olan katılımcıların görüşleri programı yapılandırmak açısından önemli bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada 15 katılımcıyla yüz yüze görüşmeler yoluyla devam etmiş oldukları edebiyat dersleri hakkındaki görüşleri ve önerileri sorulmuştur. Bunun yanında, bir anket çalışması da görüşmelere katılmamış olan 100 öğretmen adayına bulguları desteklendirmek ve yorumlama sürecini sağlamlaştırmak amacıyla uygulanmıştır. Sonuç olarak, bulguların içeriğine bakıldığında, öğretmen adaylarının edebiyat derslerini öğretmen yetiştirmenin önemli bir parçası olarak gördüğü ve bu dersler için, tüm programın başarısı ve verimliliği açısından, somut önerileri olduğu görülmektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Edebiyat dersleri, ders programı, öğretmen adaylarının görüşleri, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A serious debate stirred most ELT departments in Turkey when the Higher Education Council adopted a curriculum for all departments situated at Faculties of Education, including the ELT department, in an effort to both upgrade and unify curriculum structure across the country. It is argued that such a new attempt resulted in putting an emphasis on Turkish syntax, phonology, morphology and literature courses such as English poetry, novel, and short story while de-emphasizing the role of skills teaching such as learning and teaching of aspects and skills of language teaching specifically and separately taught in the former curriculum (Çelik, 2000).

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The place of literature in any ELT curriculum is still a matter of fervent discussion, embodying multiple and often clashing views and remains as competing constructs despite the relative paucity of empirical research in the field (Maley, 2001). In such a conflicting realm, literature is attributed a range of labels from being an integral part of the curriculum to being irrelevant or positively harmful to ELT (Maley, 2001). Such debate continues up until today, for instance, since Shakespeare, who is far from easy for native speakers, is obligatory reading for undergraduates whose own production of English may occasionally lapse into a comedy of errors (Buckledee, 2002). Likewise, the place of literature in the language teaching curriculum in Turkey, at all levels of instruction, show similarity to the aforementioned situation observable in the rest of the world. Even though teaching literature to EFL/ESL classes has been losing its popularity, it has equally been suggested that it should be included in the curriculum of high schools and universities in Turkey (Turker, 1998). When the place of the new curriculum is reviewed in contextual terms, that is to say, at Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching department, it is possible to hear some voices from the staff saying that literature should not be a weighing part of the teacher education curriculum in this specific teacher education context. Such a belief may stem from the assumption that previous curriculum which had given importance to methodology courses was more beneficial for the professional development of the prospective language teachers despite the scarcity of research based conclusions.

This newer curriculum has been studied in terms of its applicability and effectiveness in teacher education at large and it is concluded that much future research as well as actual changes are needed to improve the system it self (Kiran, 2002). Thus, it is suggested that serious and continuous research is needed to check on the development of the newly evolving curriculum while improving it through updating the segments (such as the courses, syllabi, etc.) with the help of such contextually produced knowledge. In this study, curriculum evaluation is carried out as a summative evaluation which seeks to make decisions about the worth or value of different aspects of the curriculum to determine the effectiveness of a program, its efficiency, and to some extent its acceptability (Richards, 2001). This summative evaluation tried to answer the following research questions.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Research Questions**

In light of the aforementioned reasons stemming from the context, as well as because of the scarcity of previous research, three main questions guided this research study:

1. What is the importance of literature courses in the education of these students?
2. What literature courses do these prospective teachers find most beneficial and why?
3. What changes do they suggest to improve the effectiveness of these courses specified?

### **2.2 Data Collection Instruments and Participants**

Because no single data source is sufficient for all purposes, many researchers in teacher education favor the use of multiple data source systems withholding the belief that excellence in teaching comes in a variety of configurations and areas of performance (Beerens, 2000). Two data collection instruments are used for the purposes of this research. The primary data are collected through face-to-face interviews with 15 fourth year ELT students who have taken all

literature courses offered at Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, ELT department. During these interviews a total number of six structured questions were asked to reveal the relationship between the participants' literature courses and their prospective teacher education.

In 2004-2005 school year, the secondary data were collected through a questionnaire which was conducted with 100 students who were not previously interviewed. The results of these questionnaires are used to strengthen the results of the interviews while empowering and synthesizing the overall analysis and interpretation process.

### **2.3 Analysis of Data**

In terms of the analysis of the interview data, a thematic analysis is applied. Knowing that themes are abstract constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection procedures, an inductive coding is applied to identify and refine the themes to the point where they can be applied to an entire corpus of texts. In such an analysis, a careful reading and segmenting the data and comparing each theme with the rest, has evolved as a continuous process attempting to understand, interpret, and write up the views of the prospective ELT teachers.

## **3. FINDINGS**

### **3.1 Questionnaire Findings**

#### **3. 1. 1 The importance of literature courses in the curriculum**

**Table 1: Are literature courses necessary for your development as an English language teacher?**

Very necessary	Necessary	Not necessary
14 %	84 %	2 %

The results of the opinion survey of questionnaires show that 14 % of the students find the literature courses very important for their development as foreign language teachers, 84 % of them find it important while only 2 % claim that these courses are not important. Adding that those who think that these courses are important or very important make up the 98 % of the total surveyors, it can be suggested that students themselves realize, and then acknowledge the fact that literature has an impact and place in their development as teachers.

#### **3. 1. 2 How beneficial are the literature courses in prospective teacher education**

**Table 2: Do you/ will you use what you have learned in these courses in your present/ future teaching contexts?**

Definitely	Somehow	Not really
92 %	4 %	4 %

The majority of the surveyors find all literature courses beneficial. 92 % of the respondents claim that they will use what they have learned in these courses in their future teaching contexts. Likewise, this positive evaluation of literature courses is also reflected in the respondents'

sequencing of the courses from the most beneficial course to the least, since it signifies a meaningful rationale that has a lot to do with how the respondents view these courses qualitatively.

**Table 3: Which literature courses have been most beneficial?**

Short Story	British L.	Poetry	Drama	Novel
30 %	26 %	18 %	14 %	12 %

For the respondents, Short Story (30 %) and Introduction to British Literature (26%) are the leading courses in terms of their beneficence to the preparation of these prospective teachers. The other three courses show similarity in their final assessment by the students with 18% for Poetry, 14% for Drama, and 12 % for Novel.

**Table 4: Which of your language skills and abilities have improved in these courses?**

Vocabulary	Reading	Speaking	Grammar	Listening
50 %	34 %	12 %	4 %	0 %

In terms of the relationship among the aspects and skills of the English language and literature courses, 50 % of the respondents claimed that their knowledge of the vocabulary improved with the help of these literature courses while those who claimed their reading skill improved made up the 34 % of their responses. The respondents who believe that their speaking is benefited from these courses make up the 12 % and grammar 4 %. On the other hand, in terms of some other areas benefited from these courses, those who claim that their cultural and aesthetic understanding has benefited from these courses make up 24 %, an important numerical evidence that requires careful attention.

### 3. 1. 3 Changes needed to improve the effectiveness of the courses specified

**Table 5: Are you satisfied with the overall literature curriculum in this department?**

Yes	No	Yes, but it needs changes
18 %	28 %	54 %

The question investigating if the respondents were satisfied with the contents of these literature courses, only 18 % of them respond positively, and 28 % negatively. However, 54 % of the respondents claim that all literature courses, by and large, need minor changes even though they may remain as they are in the current curriculum. Thus, it can be said that despite the fact that only 18% of the respondents seem to be satisfied with the contents of these courses, their problems with the contents are minor and not formidable.

**Table 6: Which courses' syllabi require most urgent and serious change?**

British L.	Poetry	Novel	Drama	Short Story
50 %	24 %	12 %	12 %	2 %

In terms of the evaluation of each of the literature courses, respondents point at two courses as requiring urgent change. Despite the students' evaluation of Introduction to British Literature course as the second best course in beneficence to these students, it is surprising, yet noteworthy, that 50 % of the surveyors demand that the content of the Introduction to British Literature courses are the ones that necessitate the most urgent change. Following that, Poetry Analysis and Teaching makes up the 24 % of the responses. Both Novel and Drama courses equally make up 12 % and Short Story is the only course that is asked to be changed only by 2 % of the respondents, signaling an increased satisfaction in terms of its content. The interview findings given below will investigate the reasons for such results.

**Table 7: What should the place of literary texts be in these courses?**

More literary texts needed	Less literary texts needed
84 %	16 %

**Table 8: What should the place of teaching skills be in these courses?**

More teaching skills are needed	Less teaching skills are needed
66 %	44 %

**Table 9: What should the place of historical-biographical knowledge be in these courses?**

More of such knowledge is needed	Less off such knowledge is needed
38 %	62 %

When asked what aspects or segments of these courses should be minimized or strengthened for their effectiveness, 84 % of the surveyors want to have more exposure to literary texts while 66 % of them want the emphasis to be put on the teaching of literature such as those structured pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. Upon the biographical and historical knowledge taught in these courses, 72 % of those surveyors demand minimizing such knowledge. Thus, it can be said that, the majority of students demand to be given more literary texts but less historical and biographical knowledge, while they seem to be satisfied with the teaching of literature despite a stronger rejection by 44% of those wishing minimizing such knowledge.

**Table 10: Should there be additional/elective literature courses?**

Yes	No
88 %	12 %

The last question asked to the respondents was whether they would like to have additional or elective courses such like world literature, film and literature, literary theory, etc., and 88 % of the respondents approached the idea positively. Such a result might be used to emphasize that, for the participants, literature means to be a connector between these students' linguistic and cultural development, bridging their professional and educational growth with the target language and culture as well as the students' their own life styles through various means. At last but not least,

students' positive opinions about having additional literature courses show that they see these courses as necessary and informing.

### **3.2 Interview Findings**

The following are a concise description of the findings derived from the analysis of the interview scripts.

#### **3. 2. 1 The importance of literature courses in the education of these students**

In the interviews, all prospective language teachers, except one, declared that literature courses were a fundamental part of their education without which an important segment of their learning experience would be missing. It is noteworthy that the exceptional student who claimed that literature was not a fundamental part of her education suggested that it is not that literature courses were not important but she had trouble with the idea of having to read literature on demand, unlike her past literary reading experiences which were largely done voluntarily. Hence, it is possible to claim that all interviewees identify the value of literature courses in their prospective teacher education.

#### **3. 2. 2 How beneficial are the literature courses in prospective teacher education**

The interviews revealed that literature courses were valued by the participants for their development as teachers because of the benefits that fall into three main categories. First, these courses help the participants with many language skills among which vocabulary and reading make up the largest segment. The interviewees claim that not only they develop their vocabulary but also they read literary texts, in processes taking longer time than any other reading happening in and for any other course. Furthermore, the majority of students also reported that literature courses are the ones in which they experience satisfactory classroom interaction in English.

Second, the participants find literature courses of utmost importance for these courses introduce different world-views and ideologies through which they are sensitized towards other cultures and individuals other than their own. Third, such beneficence also encapsulates that it is not the mere knowledge that makes such an experience appealing but the procedural activity itself which has a lot to do with the nature of knowledge encapsulated in these courses. An epitomizing rationale has been put forward by one interviewee as follows:

*"These (literature courses) expand our world-views. Other than these courses, we don't have other courses that give us a sense of other cultures. These courses are valuable because through these we learn about other cultures by communicating with other cultures rather than burdening knowledge about them. We should not learn those so-called scientific things all the time. We should learn life styles as we learn about other people living in different cultures in these courses."*

#### **3. 2. 3 Changes needed to improve the effectiveness of the courses specified**

All participants demanded to have additional and elective courses so that they can further their cultural and aesthetic experience. Ten of them, furthermore, claimed that such elective courses will help them practice through native texts. Similar to the questionnaire results,

interviews suggest that prospective language teachers want Introduction to British Literature course to be restructured more than any other course offered in the curriculum. The reason is that, for these students, even though they are exposed to the history of British literature in a survey type of syllabus design, the course is one that prioritizes mere knowledge rather than involving the analysis and discussion of literary passages. Parallel to that, Short Story course is argued to be the most accessible course since the passages are shorter and the classroom interaction is more dynamic. Drama and poetry, on the other hand, are still difficult for these students for the students have hard time catching the literary and poetic language used in the texts offered in these courses.

The interviews have shown that students are in dilemma in terms of what these courses should include. That is to say, they often show their dilemma by focusing on whether the tasks and activities offered in the present program are applicable in their future contexts. The participants are aware that literature is not a part of English Language Teaching programs in the Ministry of National Education and the courses fall short in legitimizing itself in this situation. Some students suggested that some courses should center on the teaching of literature but others should emphasize analysis and literary interpretation. Furthermore, some others claimed that the teaching of literature should be an elective, or separate, course on its own.

#### **4.CONCLUSION**

Literature courses should be seen as a multidimensional field from a curricular perspective which requires serious study, so as to say, literature teaching doesn't become a monolith in the curriculum in which any teacher can teach because the view of the text never changes but literary texts should be seen as starting points for creative activities that lead to production (Widdowson, 1992). Thus, literature courses may provide valuable opportunities to develop students' listening, reading, speaking, writing skills along with carefully planned courses.

Data gathered from these prospective language teachers warn us for the use of literature in this context. Parallel to the research literature, the results of this study suggest that prospective ELT teachers prefer to learn with literature rather than learn about literature, a point also made by Parkinson and Thomas (2000) as "courses which involve extensive surveys of literary history, and teaching methods which rely substantially on lectures, may help students to pass the required examinations but they do little to develop literature for the resources of the majority of individual students (p. 4). Hence, future modifications should consider what students have commented, what literature says, and how the context can allow the framework of the new curriculum.

At last, since it is research that informs the practice with its collaboration often with the practitioners themselves, continuous research will shed light to the relationship between the education of prospective language teachers and literature as a counterpart of their curriculum. While doing that, not only literature courses but also all other segments of it must continuously be evaluated. In light of the aforementioned, data based reasons, curricular changes should be made while continuously updating the literature courses offered at this program with syllabi addressing the content needed by these students, including all instructional and testing procedures by and large (Nunan, 1988; Richards, 2001).

Thus, future research must, first, concentrate on needs analyses upon which the contents of these courses are changed by bridging the students' expectations, opinions, and needs and the givens of the curriculum (Yalden, 1987). Thus, conducting similar studies with the prospective

English language teachers enrolled in this program will help improving the current language teacher education curriculum at this setting. Keeping in mind that each and all aspects of English Language Teaching are interrelated, the body of literature courses may be re-conceptualized together with the spread of parallel notions such as emotional intelligence (Maley, 2001) or constructivism (Erdem & Demirel 2002) all of which are co-applicable. Such conclusion shows the importance of literature as an undeniable segment of language teaching from a theoretical perspective both from ELT as well as curricular perspectives.

In light of the data collected and analyzed, the following points appear to be fundamental in completion of this research process:

1. Students, overwhelmingly, support the view that literature courses in current curriculum are beneficial and necessary for the professional development of the prospective English language teacher. Thus, literature courses must be taken as a serious counterpart of prospective teacher education during their planning, implementation, and curricular development phases.
2. It is the students' belief that they will make use of what they learn in these courses in their future teaching contexts. Hence, the department's curriculum design should reconsider the applicability of the contents of these literature courses into the students' future teaching contexts. However, it must also be noted that since literature in English is not a part of the Ministry of National Education curricula for primary and secondary education, realistic explanations of such knowledge must guide these planning and delivering processes. One important question for this process might be if or how literature teaching skills should be taught.
3. As the data suggest, these prospective teachers want to have more access to literature related courses such like 'Literature for Vocabulary Development' or 'Film and Literature' through which the students will have access to the authentic use of the language. Thinking that such courses will have positive effect on these students' language skills such courses must be taught at least as elective courses.
4. The findings reveal that there are certain aspects in the syllabi of these courses to be retained and some others to be reviewed and reconsidered. Hence, students, even though they are content with these courses, demand minor changes in the curriculum design. It is the students' argument that certain literature courses necessitate urgent content changes. Introduction to British Literature course, the one that students find beneficial most, is the first in this list.
5. Furthermore, the interview results suggest that the students find the contents of the novel, poetry, and drama courses more difficult to follow because these types require ways of reading that are different from those of the short story and Introduction to British Literature.
6. In short, the interview findings verify the questionnaire results that the students identify short story reading as simpler and less complex than the readings of other literature courses. Thus, the effects of the level of difficulty of literary texts should be considered during the curricular changes under the light of more classroom-oriented research.
7. Upon the content of these courses at large, students demand to be exposed to a greater number of literary texts, less historical and biographical information, and somehow more teaching of literature in classroom through demonstrations. These needs should be addressed in the future curriculum making processes.



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